Centre of the Creative Universe:
Liverpool and the Avant-Garde
Educators' Resource Pack

"Liverpool is at the present moment the centre of the consciousness of the human universe"   *- Allen Ginsberg, 1965*

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Prince Albert Dock, Liverpool, GB,* 1966
Copyright Bernd and Hilla Becher

The Exhibition

This major exhibition at Tate Liverpool (20 February – 9 September 2007) coincides with Liverpool's 800th anniversary celebrations. It takes its title from a slightly distorted version of a quote from Beat poet Allen Ginsberg who visited in 1965. It also investigates how a diverse range of artists have been inspired by and contributed to the city's unique culture. The exhibition covers the second half of the Twentieth Century with particular focus on the avant-garde activity of the 1960s. It explores documentary photography and video, the consequences of political and social upheaval in the 1970s and 80s, and the responses of contemporary artists to a city that was seeking to redefine and regenerate in recent years. Due to the wide ranging aspirations of the exhibition, this pack will focus on key artists and themes of the 1960s, though the suggested workshop ideas and activities offer opportunities for making links and exploring the exhibition as a whole.

Centre of the Creative Universe

Critiques of Liverpool's art and culture in the 1960s have tended to concentrate on Merseybeat and Pop Art. While it is true that the Beatles and their contemporaries certainly drew worldwide attention to the city, most of these groups eventually gravitated towards London once they had made their names. Carnaby Street in London was the centre of the Swinging Sixties and British Pop art was focused on the Royal College of Art. In reality, Liverpool's art scene felt closer to America than London's Swinging Sixties. Adrian Henri and Sam Walsh used to jokingly call themselves "jazz artists" rather than "pop", believing that their art owed more to the free-form improvisation of American artists than the kitsch and Victoriana of their London contemporaries.

It was almost certainly the Beatles connection, however, that persuaded Ginsberg to make a detour on his trip to Britain in 1965.
Adrian Henri claimed that his famous statement referred;

> *"to the cataclysmic effect of the Beatles and Merseybeat*
> *in general; yet the visual arts (and poetry) benefited from*
> *the sheer headiness, the excitement of the time, as well as*
> *the attention generated by the music".*

During his week amongst the city's avant-garde, Ginsberg said
that Liverpool reminded him of San Francisco – a comparison that most residents in the late 1960s would have laughed at. However, the community of artists, poets, writers and intellectuals that gathered in the pubs, clubs and each others' houses in the area surrounding the art school, certainly felt an affinity with the West Coast scene.

The Liverpool College of Art was the hub of avant-garde activity in the late 1960s. The influential and respected, Arthur Ballard whose pupils had included Stuart Sutcliffe and John Lennon, was joined at the college by a younger and more rebellious group of teachers – amongst them, Adrian Henri, Sam Walsh and Keith Arnatt. There had been a strong tendency towards abstraction in the Liverpool art scene, partly due to Ballard who was himself influenced by European artists such as Nicholas de Staël. The newly established John Moores competition at the Walker Art gallery had also been dominated by abstract works, particularly in the mid 1960s when Modernist critic Clement Greenberg had presided over the panel of judges. Adrian Henri said "*the situation was ripe for take-over".*

Two Painters: Maurice Cockrill and Sam Walsh

Maurice Cockrill

Maurice Cockrill was born in Hartlepool but spent eighteen years in Liverpool before seeking fame and fortune in London. The work of his "Liverpool period" is characterised by what he termed a "synthetic realist" style – carefully composed from drawings, photographs and memories, and usually drawn from his personal surroundings. His technique benefited greatly from the availability of fast-drying acrylics and air-brushes that enabled the even distribution of paint and almost unnatural clarity of his images.

Cockrill attributed the stillness and tranquil atmosphere of his paintings to his own detachment from the chaotic life-style of his friends in Liverpool 8. He moved out of the house he shared with Henri to the quieter location of Windermere House (featured in John Baum's painting) near Sefton Park.

Two Windows/Two People is comprised of two panels joined together. The artist and his partner stand at a window each in a double portrait that suggests, perhaps, that shared accommodation does not necessarily mean a shared life or feelings.

Activity
- Write...what you think each person could be thinking.
- Make...your own artwork called Two Windows/Two People

Discuss:
- Which works in the exhibition do you think represent real life and which appear staged or unreal?
- The differences between objective and subjective art
- Find painters who you think could have been influenced by photography
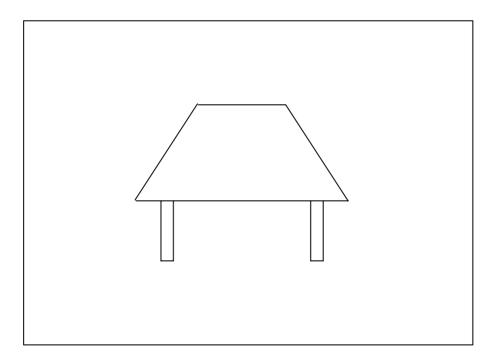- What clues in their work could suggest this?

Sam Walsh
Sam Walsh was born in Dublin but moved to Liverpool in 1960 and remained there for the rest of his life. As with many artists of his generation, his early works, such as *Three Figures in a Warm Climate*, 1965 demonstrated a disregard for traditional fine art materials using industrial paints and cheap hardboard. Many of his early works also employed a white background, evoking an ambiguous space similar to that created by the rolls of backing paper in photographers' studios. The lack of background detail here also gives the impression that the brightly coloured figures have been cut out and collaged onto the picture surface.

Walsh was a popular figure in the Liverpool art scene of the 1960s, particularly for his wry sense of humour, which pervades his paintings. *M. Paul Cézanne on the M6*, represents a witty comment on a major environmental issue of the time – the proposed extension to the motorway through the Lake District. Walsh has transferred Cézanne and his favoured motif, Mont St Victoire to the Lakeland Fells with the barrier of the M6 between artist and landscape.
- **Discuss**: Whose side do you think Walsh was on – the environmentalists or the road-builders? Do you think he could be poking fun at both parties?
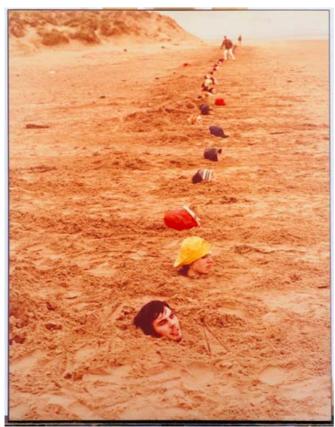
Perhaps, Walsh's most famous painting is *Dinner Party* which took its inspiration from a pre-Raphaelite painting, *Isabella*, 1848 by John Everett Millais. He would have seen this work at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. Like Millais, Walsh used friends as sitters for his diners, taking individual photographs and making numerous drawings of each head before deciding on their positions at the table. Included in the composition are Adrian Henri, Arthur Ballard, Roger McGough and his own self-portrait (two of them) either side of the table's centre.

- Copy this grid and create your own *Dinner Party* with photographs, drawings or figures cut from magazines
- Look up the story of *Isabella* on the Walker Art Gallery's website
- Does *Dinner Party* tell any stories?
- Is there a relationship between the diners in your own version of *Dinner Party*?

Performance and Conceptual Art

Sixties art was very much about experimentation – using different materials, including the artist's body. Due to the ephemeral nature of the medium, many performances have been undocumented, forgotten or misremembered. Some have become exaggerated and mythologised over the years. Adrian Henri played a key part in the organisation and presentation of many performances in Liverpool and his book *Environments and Happenings*, 1974 provides an invaluable account of this area of study.

Keith Arnatt, *Liverpool Beach Burial,* 1968
Copyright Keith Arnatt

Keith Arnatt's *Liverpool Beach Burial,* 1968, enlisted the help of volunteers who allowed the artist to bury them up to their necks in a long line on Formby beach, all facing out to sea. The act, which was captured in a series of photographs, demonstrates the literal disappearance of the "art object".

The Bluecoat Gallery was the venue for experimental art in the 1960s, including the first presentation of The Boyle Family's psychedelic *Son et Lumiere for Bodily Fluids and Functions,* 1967. The Boyles later returned to Liverpool in 1976 in order to take casts of areas of the Herculaneum Dock, chosen at random. The process preserved the surface of cobbles, pavement slabs, and every grain of dust and grit intact, as frozen images of reality which they subsequently recreated in great detail in fibreglass.

Yoko Ono was a leading performance artist before she met John Lennon. One of her rare performances of *Cut Piece* took place at the Bluecoat in 1967, where she was wrapped in bandages and the audience was invited to cut them away until she was naked.
The interaction between artist and spectators is a key feature of performance art. The artist takes the place of the art object and the audience part of the artistic process. Yoko Ono has staged *Cut Piece* at a number of locations around the world, and has been interested in the different responses from each audience, depending on culture, gender and social context.

Discuss

- The relationship between artist and audience in events or performance art, and how it is similar or different to the relationship between artist and audience in other art forms such as painting, sculpture or film
- Whether Yoko Ono's work would have been different if the artist had been male
- How different audiences might respond to Ono's performance depending on their culture, social background, age or gender

Activities
- Create a performance that relates to a specific site in the city (It could be based on a work in the exhibition)
- Take rubbings of pavements, cobbles, bricks to create a visual record a particular site.
- Make a cardboard frame (1m x 1m) and drop it over an area in your home, school, garden etc. Draw whatever falls inside the frame.

Photography

The 1960s saw many technical advances in photography. It also became valued as an expressive medium rather than simply a means for artists to document their work, or as a possible source material. The rapid expansion of magazine publication and the introduction of the Sunday supplement also opened new opportunities for photographers in the fields of advertising and fashion. By the 1980s, photography was gaining validity within the art world and with the advent of video, helped expand and reshape the possibilities of artistic expression.

Henri Cartier-Bresson helped develop an influential style of street photography and he is considered to be the innovator of modern photo-journalism. He said, "To me photography is the simultaneous recognition in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organisation of forms that give that event its proper expression" which he summed up as the "decisive moment". The exhibition features photographs taken in Liverpool in the 1960s.

Edward Chambre Hardman's home and studio at 26 Rodney Street is now a museum and archive of his work. His business was portrait photography, but his passion was landscape – both rural and urban. He captured stunning views of Liverpool locations in his leisure time.

Stewart Bale was a commercial firm specialising in architectural and technical photographs, but they also undertook commissions for shipping lines, such as the Cunard series featured in this exhibition.

Bernd and Hilla Becher are associated with minimalist photography depicting industrial architecture such as pit-heads and water towers. They took a series of photographs of the derelict Liverpool docks in 1966.

Candida Höfer, a German photographer visited Liverpool in 1968 She presents seemingly unmediated shots of everyday life in the city, which are meant to be seen as a series rather than individually.

Astrid Kirchherr is famous for her defining images of the Beatles taken in their Hamburg years. In 1964 she travelled to Britain with **Max Scheler** to photograph the band on the set of

the film, *A Hard Day's Night.* They also visited Liverpool in order to capture some of their haunts, including the Cavern.

Activities

- Compare Höfer's seemingly spontaneous images to the Boyle Family's casts of random sites in the dock area.
- Take a camera, notebook or sketchbook with you on a walk around the city. Record random images, thoughts and words that come to mind.
- Make a collage, poem or piece of prose with your results. Compare your resulting picture of the city with the rest of your class. Discuss how each person presents a different view.
- You could display your works together to form an installation work about the city and maybe incorporate music.
- Which songs would you choose to describe the city?

Work in Focus
Adrian Henri, *The Entry of Christ into Liverpool in 1964 (Homage to James Ensor),* 1962-64

Adrian Henri, *The Entry of Christ into Liverpool in 1964 (Homage to James Ensor)*, 1962-64
Copyright Catherine Marcangeli

"The pop artist stands with one foot in the art gallery and the other in the supermarket"   - Adrian Henri

The stencilled words along the exposed hessian of this work by artist and poet Adrian Henri, declare that it is a tribute to Symbolist artist, James Ensor. His painting, *The Entry of Christ into Brussels,* 1889, provided the inspiration for Henri's work. It depicts the imaginary "Second Coming" of Christ, set in 1960s Liverpool, with St George's Hall on the left and Lime Street Station on the right of the scene. The Guinness clock was also a familiar landmark in Liverpool, though in real life it was situated on the other side of the road.

Henri shared Ensor's view that if Christ was to return to earth in modern times, the event would certainly be co-opted by other publicity seekers. In both artists' paintings, the figure of Christ is almost insignificant, swamped by the hordes of people around him. The procession in Henri's scene has been joined by various political demonstrators, The Orange Lodge, a host of local celebrities and a cast of the artist's friends and heroes. All march beneath a banner that proclaims, "*Long Live Socialism*." Compared to Ensor's rather nightmarish mob, Henri's crowd forms a civilised parade and on the whole, displays a more optimistic view of humanity.

This large, colourful painting took the artist two years to complete, making numerous changes to the figures and composition during the process. He was particularly annoyed with George Melly's wife, Diane, for changing the colour of her hair three times between 1962 and 1964. In the completed painting, she is the red-haired woman in the centre of the front row with George to her right. Other identifiable figures include The Beatles, fellow Merseybeat poets Roger McGough and John Gorman, jazz musicians Charley Parker and Charlie Mingus (in red and gold ceremonial dress), artists Sam Walsh, Arthur Dooley, James Ensor (as Christ)….and numerous others.

The strange creature in the centre of the painting is Père Ubu, a character created by French writer, Alfred Jarry (who also features in the middle ground of the painting, riding a bicycle). Henri identified closely with Ubu, having played him many times in performances of Jarry's works. He was also the subject of a number of surreal paintings by Henri, where Ubu was imagined in different locations such as Liverpool's shopping centre and the beach at Rhyl. It is possible that Ubu represents Henri himself in *The Entry of Christ into Liverpool in 1964.*

As with many of Henri's paintings, the idea developed from a line in one of his poems (*I Want to Paint*). He later wrote a poem based on the painting. Poetic images for Henri frequently became painted images. He also openly used cross-references to other artists, writers and musicians in both his paintings and poetry. His approach to art and writing demonstrated a desire to strip away elitism and to make his work accessible to a wide audience. He used recognisable settings and employed everyday motifs and references from popular culture and advertising. He also used simple language, both verbally in his poems and visually in the form and structure of his paintings.

The style of this painting is typical of Henri's cultural eclecticism. It borrows from a number of art movements – the use of flags and logos from Pop Art, Expressionistic colours and brushstrokes, the fragmented surface and stencilled lettering of Cubism, the iconography of Renaissance Art, the imagery of Surrealism – all combine to create a vibrant painting. It is a humanist's view of a religious subject that any city-dweller can relate to.

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Activities

Look at *The Entry of Christ into Brussels,* 1888 by James Ensor. **Discuss** differences in style and technique between this and Henri's painting. Are there any similarities?

Look at other works of art featuring crowd scenes eg *Entry into Jerusalem*, by Duccio, 1308-11; Pieter Brueghel's *Children's Games*, 1559; *Going to the Match*, 1928, by L S Lowry; Eduard Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*, 1862; Antony Gormley's *Field.*
Discuss how these artists have chosen to represent large numbers of people

Look at images of processions, festivals, civic receptions, royal visits, sports teams parading trophies etc
Discuss your experiences of being involved in any of the above. What does it feel like to be part of a crowd?

Look at Peter Blake and Jan Howarth's design for The Beatles' Sgt Pepper album cover.
Discuss the differences between collage and painting. Does this image remind you of Adrian Henri's painting?

Recreate this painting in a contemporary setting (part of your town, district or school). Which people would you include?
This could be a collage, using images of famous people and photographs of your friends and family.

Make a composite crowd painting or collage for your classroom, with each pupil contributing a self-portrait or photograph.
Write a poem called "In the Crowd"

Make a work of art inspired by a line from a poem
Write a poem or piece of prose inspired by a work of art

Read Adrian Henri's poem *The Entry of Christ into Liverpool*
Compare painting and poetry

City morning, dandelion seeds   blowing from wasteground
smell of overgrown privethedges.   children's voices
in the distance.   sounds from the river.
round the corner into Myrtle St.   Saturdaymorning shoppers
then
   down the hill
        THE SOUND OF TRUMPETS
        cheering and shouting in the distance
           children running
           icecream vans
        flags breaking out over buildings
         black and red green and yellow
          Union Jacks   Red Ensigns
          LONG LIVE SOCIALISM
        stretched out against the blue sky

over St George's Hall
now the procession
THE MARCHING DRUMS

Extract from The Entry of Christ into Liverpool by Adrian Henri

Further Reading:

Davies, Peter, *Liverpool Seen: Post-war Artists on Merseyside,* Redcliffe Press, 1992,

Du Noyer, Paul, Liverpool: Wondrous Place – Music from the Cavern to Cream, Virgin, 2002

Fogle, Douglas, *The Last Picture Show – Artists Using Photography*, *1960-82,* T Walker Art Centre, 2003

Grunenberg, Christoph, *Centre of the Creative Universe: Liverpool and the Avant-garde,* Liverpool University Press, 2007

Harris, Jonathan and **Grunenberg,** Christoph (eds), *Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis and Counter Culture in the 1960s,* Liverpool University Press, 2006

Henri, Adrian, *Environments and Happenings*, Thames and Hudson, 1974

Henri, Adrian, **McGough,** Roger, **Patten,** Brian, The Penguin Modern Poets: Mersey Sound, 1968

Kidson, Alex, *Sam Walsh*, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, 1991

Livingstone, Marco and **Alfrey**, Nicholas, *Maurice Cockrill*, Merrell Publishers, 2002

Milner, Frank, *Adrian Henri: Paintings 1953 – 1998*, NMGM/Bluecoat Press, Liverpool, 2000

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, 1979

Other resources

www.andyrobertsmusic.com/adrian_page1.html

www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/summeroflove

www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/artandthe60s/

www.archive.liverpool.gov.uk

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/online/pre-raphaelites/lorenzo.asp

Julie Robson, February 2007